

## Staging the Scene: Bart Ramakers' exuberant dialogue with artistic heritage

Maximiliaan Martens

In Bart Ramakers' photographs, mythology and fairy tales are staged with references to the grand artistic tradition of history painting. Ramakers appeals to his viewers' collective imaginary museum of paintings from the Renaissance, Baroque, Rococo and Classicism. About his thematic choices, the artist says:

*"I am trying to abolish the separation between ratio and imagination, which was introduced in Western culture by the Enlightenment. I want to intertwine reality with myths, phantasy, fairy tales and other fables. (...) Opening up to mythology is magical; having lost that in our current culture is impoverishment..."*

His work is not merely post-modern recuperation with the aim of deconstructing. In line with the movie *Orphée* by the surrealist film director Jean Cocteau, he actualises classical tradition to question the human condition. The notion of ambiguity is explored around two important preoccupations: the relations between men and women, and the problematic relationship towards religion.

In *Die, Actaeon, die!* the two models adapt the poses of François Boucher's *Diane sortant du bain* (Paris, Musée du Louvre). The original painting represents Diana, goddess of hunting, who is helped by a nymph to get dressed after a bath. Fowl lies at the right of the composition. The two hunting dogs at the left have just noticed Actaeon approaching. After incidentally stumbling upon the naked goddess and her nymphs, this mortal will be metamorphosed into a deer, and devoured by his own dogs that fail to recognise him. In Ramakers' photograph the dogs are replaced by a leopard, while at the fowl's place, a paparazzo hit by one of Diana's arrows lies dead on the floor. For the artist, the photographer stands for the male gaze that is instrumental in his own doom. Eventually, he becomes the victim of his voyeurism. The goddess and nymph are seated on a leopard skin, which thus figures as their attribute and transforms the women into predators.

In *Anatomy for Artists*, this theme is further elaborated. This work shows a photographer dreamingly gazing at his model, at the point of desperately falling in love with her, instead of concentrating on his work, materialised by the treatise on human

anatomy and the photographic gear lying on the table. The scene is set in Ramakers' own study, amidst his favourite books, music and movies.

In the classical tale of the sculptor Pygmalion, his love for a nude female sculpture, made her alive. Here things are about to turn out less favourable. The model hands a lens to the photographer. Does she offer him advice in doing so, or is she passing him the weapon of his thrift, his voyeurism that will lead to his destruction? And if the latter were true, can the male observer not ask the question why Ramakers is luring him into voyeurism?

The theme of the unfortunate photographer recurs in the series *Bluebeard*. Set in the neo-classical castle 'Ter Linden' at Edegem near Antwerp, the lord of the house is again a photographer, who is keeping a dark secret, symbolised by a little red key that always hangs at his belt. Ramakers' Bluebeard doesn't collect dead bodies of women, but nudes in two dimensions. One of his models gets a hold of the red key, and discovers his secret. As of then, the photographer becomes the victim of his models' mockery.

It is significant that he is now shown sitting on hands and knees, a pose of submission and humiliation. This motif finds its origin in the story of Aristotle and Phyllis, a 13<sup>th</sup>-century fable. Alexander the Great's mistress seduces the great philosopher and promises herself to him if he allows her to ride his back, by which he ends up as the centre of derision. This story became part of a series known as 'the Power of Women' in early 16<sup>th</sup>-century prints by e.g. Lucas van Leyden.

Also in *La grande danse des hommes et des femmes*, a man is treated as a hobby horse by one of the naked courtesans, while another older man serenades a cool 'blue angel', referring to the foolish Professor Unrat in Josef von Sternberg's movie, immortalised by Marlène Dietrich.

The theme of powerful women who provoke the fall of foolish men gets another turn in *Cassandra's Curse*. Although her name literally means 'she who confuses men', ultimately men and women alike become victims. Her talent for correctly predicting tragic events is ignored by everyone. The actors in the circus tent, who surround her table with the crystal sphere, have all fallen asleep.

Powerful shrewd women abandon, as if they take revenge for centuries of male domination. In *Love is All you need*, Bonnie has run away from Clyde with the booty. In *Somewhere over the Rainbow*, a young woman has sedated two older men. Is this the Old Testament Susanna getting back on the Elders? In *Strangers in the Night*, the male and

female roles in Henri Gervex's *Rolla* seem to have been reversed. If this is true, the man is not asleep, but killed by her.

Yet, the role of women remains ambiguous. In one photograph, the Greek tragic topical connection between Eros and Thanatos is present; in others, like *Queen of Hearts* or *When a Lovely Flame dies*, the women seem to be abandoned, helpless, desperate.

However, she may also save humanity. *Tire la chevillotte, la bobinette cherra!* is based on *Caritas Romana*, a story from classical antiquity, known from Caravaggio's and Rubens' painted versions. Cimon is imprisoned and sentenced to death by starvation. However, Pero secretly breastfeeds her father, an act of selflessness by which she effectuates her father's release.

*Agnus Dei* is a compositional conflation of Leonardo's *Last Supper* (Milan, Sta Maria della Grazie) and Manet's *Bar at the Folie Bergère* (London, Courtauld Institute of Art). Christ and the apostles have been replaced by women. The Agnus Dei, or Lamb of God, who will carry all sins of the world, is the woman whose love brings salvation. The series of which this photograph makes part, was shot in a Brussels art deco hotel that used to serve as a meeting place for secret lovers.

In the same series, *Lamentatio* shows five pleasure ladies who bring a drunken client to his room, assuming poses like the Mary's besides Christ's dead body. Religious references are found in earlier works, like *War of the Roses* and *Amor aeternus*. In the former, a mystical bride is lying with her arms spread like Christ after all hostilities have ended; in the latter a blond counterpart appears in front of the sun whose rays are formed by a classical parquet floor. These cruciform compositions lack the overt blasphemy of Félicien Rops' *Eros* who provocatively replaced Christ on the cross. They are rather signs of hope. In *Soupir bref*, a ghost leaves the body and takes part of his worldly possessions. The Bible and the crucifix are reminiscent of early 16<sup>th</sup> century representations of St Jerome in his Study.

In his struggle with religious tradition, Ramakers creates his own symbols of hope. He makes that clear in a rare still life, *Ad sepulturam folium*, which refers to a poem by Jacques Prévert, *Deux escargots vont à l'enterrement d'une feuille morte*. At their arrival in Spring, they discover that a new leave is about to bud.

Bart Ramakers' oeuvre is not only a discourse with artistic and literary tradition; it is also deeply rooted in an important mainstream current of the history of photography.

Although staged photography usually is associated with post-modern aesthetics, the first grand representatives of this genre, Oscar Gustav Rejlander (1813-57) and his pupil Henry Peach Robinson (1830-1901), were working in the early days of photography. Rejlander's *Two Ways of Life* of 1857 was an assembly of more than thirty individual negatives forming an allegorical composition reminiscent of Raphael's *School of Athens*. A father accompanies his two sons to the land of adulthood. While one of them looks at people representing Religion, Hard Labour and Science, the other one is lured to a licentious bacchanal of nude courtesans. By choosing the format of moralising history painting and a never seen complicated technical manipulation of negatives in the dark room, Rejlander aimed at proving that photography was a fully fledged artistic medium, and not merely a mechanical trick.

English and American pictorialists working around 1900, continued the endeavour to get photography accepted as a fine art equal to painting. Besides some surrealist experiments and the work of glamour photographers like Cecil Beaton (1904-80) mainly between the two World Wars, staged photography reappeared in the late 1970s, when the notions of objectivity and authenticity attached to modernist 'pure photography' began to be criticised. Pop culture and happening, the blend of high and low art, and post-modern art theory, incited a number of artists to deviate radically from the specifically photographic and the objective registration characteristic of documentary photography. They refuted the idea of getting out in the streets in search of a good shot, and started staging visions they cultivated in their imagination.

Pioneers like the American Duane Michals (°1932) often referred in his work to Magritte and questioned religion. His compatriot, Les Krims (°1942) staged allegorical *tableaux vivants* inspired by baroque paintings, often based on phantasy, but also thematising his problematic relationship with religion and the ambiguity of male-female interaction. Cindy Sherman (°1954) presented herself as characters from mass culture in order to problematize gender and identity. She also created a series of self-portraits after famous paintings by Raphael, Caravaggio, and other old masters. Other representatives in the 1980s are the Americans Joel-Peter Witkin (°1939) who shows transgenders and dwarfs in provocative scenes, and Sandy Skoglund (°1946), whose creations include surreal interiors with coloured animals. An important European representative of the movement is Prague born Jan Saudek (°1935) whose work features again the theme of man-woman relationships in excitatory erotic poses.

Recurring themes in the work of these artists are their problematic relationship with religion, identity and sexuality, provocative nudity, and references to old master paintings.

The term 'staged photography' was coined in two seminal publications that both appeared in 1987: Andy Grundberg & Kathleen McCarthy Gauss' *Photography and Art. Interactions since 1946* and Anne H. Hoy's *Fabrications. Staged, Altered, and Appropriated Photographs*.

The genre witnessed a renewal since the 1990s, influenced by commercial product and fashion photography and video clips. At least as important was the boost experienced by the introduction of new technologies like digital photography and image processing software, which allows breaking through any imaginable limit of objective observation of reality, while presenting ultimate teasers to the beholder. A famous contemporary artist is the American photographer David LaChapelle (°1963) who, after having worked as a 17-year old with Andy Warhol, includes portraits of celebrities like Elton John, Madonna and Naomi Campbell in his staged work.

In a recent issue of the French art photography magazine *Normal*, European artists are featured. Bart Ramakers' work is presented along with that of other photographers with whom he shares his predilection for the tradition of grand baroque and pompier composition in history painting and the female nude, like the Italian Marco Sanges (°1970), Ukrainian Anton Solomoukha (°1945), the Frenchman Gérard Rancinan (°1953), and UK based Miss Aniela aka Natalie Dybisz.

Ramakers acknowledges artists like Witkin, Saudek, and the American from Danish descent, William Mortensen (1897-1965), as inspirational photographers. But far and foremost, he is an artistic descendant from Renaissance and Baroque humanism, deeply rooted in their visual and literary heritage.

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